

Lions and Bears and Moose, Oh My!

By Tom McSheehy

My family and I were going to take a summer trip to Colorado. The plan was to hike and camp in Rocky Mountain National Park. I live in Oak Park, Illinois, and I had never been to Colorado. I had seen pictures of Colorado and knew that it had a lot of tall mountains covered with snow, beautiful forests, and wild animals that we don't have in Oak Park. My great grandfather had taken a trip there and had written a book about it. Nature is one of my favorite things in the whole world. It is an amazing feeling to hike in the woods on a path that is next to a stream. You smell the pine trees and hear the sound of water flowing over rocks. I'm interested in animals so I decided to research Colorado animals. I discovered that mountain lions, moose, black bear, caribou, elk, coyotes, foxes, hawks, and eagles are some of the animals that live in Colorado. I started thinking about seeing wild animals and what that would feel like.

School was out, fourth grade was over, and I was off to Colorado with my family. I could barely contain my excitement. Our plane landed in Denver, and my family rented a car and drove up to Rocky Mountain National Park.

When we arrived at the path to the campsite, it was around 4 PM. We walked two miles through the woods to our campsite. I was very alert the whole time looking for animals and wondering if I would see one. My heart started beating a little faster with the thought of animals that were wild and free and not in cages like at the zoo. I realized that we didn't have any protection. I asked my dad about it, and he reassured me that we were safe. He told me that animals don't want to mess with humans unless they feel threatened by them and sense that they are in danger. He told me that the forest is their home, and we are visitors. We need to show respect and give them space and all will be well. I trusted my dad.

We finally got to our campsite. I was hungry and my legs were hurting. It started pouring rain. I couldn't believe it! I was so bummed. Would I have to spend the whole week in a hot and boring tent? We quickly got our rain gear on and covered all backpacks with a plastic tarp. We couldn't set up our tent in the pouring rain. We sat and waited for the rain to stop, but it didn't. The sky looked very dark, and it seemed like it was going to rain all night. Mom and Dad decided to leave all our heavy stuff behind and hike back out to find a hotel for the night.

We got back to our car. We were tired, hungry, grouchy, and wet. My mom started singing the song "Climb Every Mountain." I couldn't believe what was happening! This was supposed to be a fun and exciting vacation. I love my mom, and she has many talents and strengths, but singing isn't one of them. I went to get my iPod so I could drown out her singing with my own music, but I remembered that I secretly stuffed it in my backpack even though I wasn't supposed to. The rule was: No technology in nature. If I had followed the rule, I wouldn't be in this situation.

We were driving around looking for a hotel, but everywhere we went, we got the same response: "Sorry, no vacancy!" My mom continued to sing every song that she could remember from the movie *The Sound of Music*. She couldn't remember all the lyrics, so she would just sing the same line over and over again. I thought I was going to lose my mind! Finally, she started singing John Denver songs and of course she started with "Rocky Mountain High." I asked my dad to turn on the radio, but he told me that we couldn't pick up any music because we were in the mountains. I decided to take a risk, and I respectfully asked my mom if she would stop singing. I couldn't see her face to see her reaction, but she said "okay".

We drove in silence from hotel to hotel. We had lost our patience a long way back. Now, I couldn't get the song "Climb Every Mountain" out of my head. But the rain finally stopped. Thank goodness! Then Dad had another brilliant idea. He was always thinking up creative ideas, but he sometimes seemed to forget that I was only ten years old. "Let's go back to campsite before it gets dark," Dad said. It was 8:00 PM, and it was going to get dark soon. We raced back to the

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path, locked the car, and started walking briskly. There was a small amount of light left, but not much. We were almost to our campsite. All we had to do was cross a stream, walk through a meadow of tall grass, and we would be there. As we were walking through the grass, a moose and her baby calf suddenly stood up about 30 yards in front of us. We all froze in shock and stared. Then we panicked and did what you aren't supposed to do—we turned around and ran. As we were running, I kept imagining that the moose was right behind us. I didn't want to look behind. I fell down and my dad picked me up. We made it across the log that covered the stream. We stopped, looked behind, and were very relieved to see that the moose didn't chase us. We were breathing really hard, standing there in silence. Suddenly Dad asked, "What are we going to do?" My mom said, "We have two choices. We could try to go across the meadow to our campsite—and maybe run into an angry moose trying to protect her baby—or we could walk back out through the dark woods."

"Great choices," I thought to myself. We decided to walk back out through the woods. It was so dark, and we only had one flashlight that barely showed the path. My mind was racing and my heart was pounding. I started to think about the scene in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow were walking through the dark woods saying, "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" My imagination was very active and kept thinking about wild moose, bear, and other animals that live in the forest. I felt like all of them were watching us as we walked through their home. My stomach was in a knot and I couldn't breathe. We heard a loud rustling sound along the path. Mom yelled, "Stop!" We listened. Was it a mountain lion or bear or small squirrel? We were very hesitant to move toward the sound. My mom shined the flashlight in the area, but nothing was there. We did see some branches moving. We took a couple of deep breaths and started tiptoeing, step by step, until finally we made it past the area where the sound was coming from. At one point, Mom, Dad, and I held hands as we walked to give us courage. I was so uncomfortable with what I was feeling inside. I started to do some belly breathing and put all my attention on my feet.

We survived the walk and made it to the car. We jumped in and locked all the doors. I could hear everyone breathing really hard. It felt like a scene out of horror movie. We drove out of the Rocky Mountain National Park without any idea of what we were going to do. We pulled over to a rest stop and tried to sleep in the car. Our bodies were still buzzing from the experience of walking through the dark forest. We couldn't sleep. We decided to drive as far as we needed to find a hotel. We drove for an hour and found a fancy hotel that was more expensive than we could afford, but we were desperate. We dragged our bodies out of the car and into the hotel dreaming of a comfy bed. The response was the same: "No vacancy." I started to cry. Dad gave me a hug. Then he saw a large reading room with couches and whispered, "Let's sneak quietly to that room over there and sleep on the couches." We made it to the couches. You won't believe what we saw as we were about to lie down. Right above us on the wall was a real stuffed moose head with fake eyes staring down at us. We did eventually make it to our campsite the next day and had a fun week exploring nature. We even saw more moose right near our campsite. That trip was truly a family adventure!